

The Ethics of Confessional Narrative in Ishiguro, Nabokov, and McEwan

A Senior Honors Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for graduation *with research distinction* in
English in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

by

Kelsey Griffiths

The Ohio State University

May 2011

Project Advisors: Professors James Phelan and Robyn Warhol, Department of English

INTRODUCTION

Confessional narrative is a genre that we see authors tackle again and again, and which has resulted in some of the most complex and powerful literary works of our time. Peter Brooks asserts in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* that “modern literature, from Romanticism on, accords the greatest importance to confessional narrative, and most major novelists at some point practice it in some form” (82). He argues that confessional narratives are such fertile ground because they coincide with the “interest in and valuation of the individual that stands at the inception of our modern conceptions of selfhood and introspection” (82). Confessional narratives lead to compelling characters because inherent in them is conflict with oneself: Brooks maintains that “‘confession’—as opposed to the memoir, for instance—implies that the speaker or writer wishes or even needs to reveal something that is hidden, possibly shameful, and difficult to articulate” (82). This does not mean, however, that a confessional narrative necessarily features a character who comes completely clean about his or her transgressions, for “the rhetoric of the genre may involve a kind of hind-and-seek, where the reader finds that what is confessed by the narrator is not the whole or the pertinent truth” (Brooks 82).

While confessional narratives are popular in part because they reflect modern conceptions of introspection, I believe they are popular for another reason that Brooks has not named. Authors and readers find confessional narratives compelling because they lead to complex judgments and foreground the kinds of ethical questions raised by storytelling itself. I will examine three canonical confessional novels that highlight the ethical consequences of telling stories about one’s own ethical transgression: Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* (1989), Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955), and Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001). In comparing

and contrasting these works, I will demonstrate some of the ways in which these novels contribute to our understanding of not only confessional narrative as a genre, but furthermore our understanding of how authors elicit certain judgments in their readers, how the ethics of ‘the telling’ intersect with those of ‘the told’, and how authors manage the delicate relationships among characters, narrators, and readers. I will also focus on how reading these three works as confessional narratives helps us to better understand them.

RHETORICAL APPROACH

My research draws primarily upon two rhetorical understandings of narrative. The first is outlined in the following way by James Phelan in *Experiencing Fiction*:

[T]he approach assumes a recursive relationship (or feedback loop) among authorial agency, textual phenomena (including intertextual relations), and reader response. [It] assumes that texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways; that those designs are conveyed through the words, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of text as well as the genres and conventions readers use to understand them; and that the reader responses are a function of and, thus, a guide to how designs are created through textual and intertextual phenomena. At the same time, reader responses are also a test of the efficacy of those designs.
(4)

Authors make choices while writing, with the intent that those choices will have a certain desired effect on readers. By understanding these effects we can better understand the author’s intent in writing their stories. We can track these effects by examining the judgments a work appears to be asking its readers to make. Phelan argues for an understanding of narrativity that “is tied to both the rhetorical definition of narrative (somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose that something happened) and the concept of narrative progression” (7). The concept of progression is a key focus in my research.

We cannot understand the effects a work has on a reader unless we understand the judgments it guides readers to make. Inherent in that word, *guides*, is the fact that readers are

drawn by authors through a progression of tellings. Phelan calls this “the temporal process of reading” (3). Our ultimate judgments at the conclusion of a narrative do not spring into being, fully developed. They are the product of our evolving judgments and expectations throughout a story. A clear problem presented with this methodology is that of subjectivity: how can a single reader know that their judgments are universal or even common? Phelan suggests one reliable way to discover authorial intent: “Individual narratives explicitly or more often implicitly establish their own ethical standards in order to guide their audiences to particular ethical judgments” which “work through the application of the ethical principles underlying the work to the specific behavior of a character (or narrator)” (10-11). In other words, we can understand what reactions the implied author is trying to elicit in the implied reader by paying attention to how the ethics of the narrator appear to align (or misalign) with the ethics endorsed elsewhere in the work.

A second important rhetorical concept I will borrow from Phelan’s work is the distinction between “the ethics of the telling” which involves “the narrator’s relation to the characters, to the task of narrating, and to the audience; and the implied author’s relation to these things,” and “the ethics of the told,” which involve the ethics of “character-character relations” (11). This is a particularly important distinction to make while discussing confessional narratives, as there is often a large disconnect between the ethics of the telling (a character’s motives in confession) and the ethics of the told (those of their transgressions.) I will discuss the consequences of this model in depth while examining what makes a successful confession.

The second rhetorical understanding of narrative upon which I base my research is that outlined in Adam Zachary Newton’s *Narrative Ethics*. He also maintains that judgments are an inherently important aspect of narrative: that in fact “literary texts demand judgment from their

interpreters” (10). In his work, Newton argues for a new understanding of the intersection of narrative and morality. He points out that the term ‘narrative ethics’ can be understood in two different ways: “as attributing to a narrative discourse some kind of ethical status” and “as referring to the way ethical discourse often depends on narrative structure” (8). Frequently, narratives are moralistically evaluated based on the ethics of their said. He insists that we should instead focus on “narrative as relationship and human connectivity, as Saying over and above Said, or as Said called to account in Saying; narrative as claim, as risk, as responsibility, as gift, as price,” concluding that “above all, as an ethics, narrative is performance or act” (7). Readers do not simply read a work and loftily judge and understand it from a distance, he argues. Rather, “one faces a text as one might face a person, having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy” (11). This is particularly the case in confessional narratives, in which we directly witness a character’s often-emotional appeal for atonement. Newton furthermore argues that stories feature “a concrete and singular other whose moral appeal precedes both decision and understanding” (12) and thus narratives are traumatic events that, “shock and linger,” with “immediacy and force” that “bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (13). This theory explains the powerful emotional reactions readers often feel towards fictional characters. A reader’s way of dealing with this trauma is skepticism—we, as listeners, regain some power over the narrator through holding ourselves back from fully believing their stories. Newton even maintains that skepticism is “the price one pays for wishing to be on intimate and authentic terms with human discourse” (5).

Confessional narratives, more than any other work, force readers to navigate this fine line between skepticism and belief. This is because, as Brooks suggests, they almost always feature some degree of unreliable narrator. Confessions involve revelation, and revelation cannot occur

unless something is first hidden – this hiding requires a narrator to be in some way unreliable. Furthermore, whereas in some stories unreliable narrators may remain unreliable throughout the work, most confessional narratives depend on their unreliable narrators becoming more reliable as they come to acknowledge their crime.

It is helpful at this point to review Phelan's definition of unreliable narration, which he calls "a mode of indirect communication" in which the author "communicates with his or her audience by means of the voice of another speaker addressing another audience" ("Unreliability" 224). Many confessional narrators remain somewhat unreliable throughout the entire work, half-confessing in order to manipulate the reader's emotions and be forgiven for their transgressions. This is a problem I will address in greater depth during my discussion of *Lolita*. Others are unreliable, but appealingly so. In *Remains of the Day*, we are frequently endeared to the unreliable narrator during moments where, for example, he anxiously overanalyzes his employer's bantering. His interpretations are unreliable, but charming nonetheless. Phelan argues that there are two distinct kinds of unreliability: "bonding unreliability" in which the narrator's misinterpretations endear him to us, or are somehow endorsed by the author, and "estranging unreliability" in which the author intends to convey something different than the character-narrator does ("Unreliability" 224). The author of an unreliable character-narrator thus plays a difficult game in managing the reader's skepticism among all these different possible reactions. A reader might miss the author's signals, being too seduced by a deceitful narrator's voice. Alternatively, the reader might completely disbelieve the authenticity of a redeemed character's confession, being too guarded against seduction.

This complexity is why confessional narratives provide such a challenging and rich environment for studying an author's management of his or her readers' expectations and

judgments. Reading these confessional progressions towards truth becomes an exercise in deciding whether or not to be skeptical of the character's motives at any given time, and to what degree. To identify shifts in the character-narrator's motivations, I will examine moments where there appears to be a 'break' in the narrative. These include instances where the narrator seems disturbed by his own telling and changes the subject abruptly, where he shares something that does not support the narrative he has been building, where he dwells upon an idea that causes him anxiety, or where he retells some part of his story with a new interpretation. These breaks indicate that a character's motivations for sharing his or her story are changing, or at least under pressure. By tracking their evolution, we can identify what 'truth' they are approaching, and thus better understand how reliable (or close to the interpretations of the implied author) they are.

SUCCESS OF CONFESSIONAL NARRATIVES

I have established that narratives in general demand judgment from the reader. These judgments are foregrounded in confessional narratives. A traditional narrative does not necessarily have an easily identifiable purpose implied by its existence, and thus no easy yardstick upon which we can measure our judgments. Confessional narratives, by definition, do have an implied objective: to confess is to seek out some degree of relief from negative judgments (made either by others or by oneself) or from the consequences of one's transgressions. Above all a successful confession is one in which we judge that the confessor is absolved of some degree of guilt, large or small. One must also keep in mind that these three novels are not pure confessional narratives, but rather the confessions of fictional characters. Whether or not we judge the character's confession as successful is important for our judgments and understanding of the work, but also a different issue than whether or not we judge the novel itself as successful.

Intuitively, a confessor can be absolved of some guilt by making amends to his or her victims in some meaningful way. We develop this sense of “what a character must do” to make amends as the story progresses, and we come to understand the nature of the character’s crimes. The actions that a character takes (in other words, the ethics of the told) certainly affect our judgments of a confession’s success. But they are not the only aspect that matters. We also make important judgments of the ethics of the telling: that is, we judge the ethics of the confession itself. Newton argues:

Confession’s purpose is to rectify (if possible) unethical action through ethical language. As de Man says, “To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth [through] an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood.” (250)

The works I have chosen to examine all feature characters that have missed the opportunity to atone for their crime through action. Their victims’ lives, as well as their own, are irreparably changed because of their transgressions. As a result, these stories explore the degree to which ethical storytelling can mitigate negative judgments of the told. While we do not dismiss the ethics of the told, they are not our only consideration.

The only requirement for a confessional narrative is a character that is willing to admit some degree of wrongdoing. A *successful* confession is dependent on both the degree of wrongdoing to which he or she is willing to admit, and the audience to which he or she makes that confession. Since confessional narratives usually feature self-deception, confessing frequently involves a doubleness wherein a character-narrator confesses not only to someone else, but also comes clean to him or herself. It is good to confess to oneself, but the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told are judged more positively if one confesses to other people. Both because this can represent an actual attempt to make amends, and because it is a greater

movement towards truth to confess to the person one has wronged than to write it down in one's personal diary. All three of the works I will examine have complicated relationships with audience and confession. None of the characters make the confession to their "appropriate hearer." I will discuss the consequences this has for our judgments of their success, and how all of these aspects of confession come together to form our final judgments of a work.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*

Remains of the Day features a character-narrator, Stevens, writing a travelogue of a short trip he takes into the English countryside to visit a former coworker, Mrs. Benn (formerly Miss Kenton.) As Stevens begins to lapse into introspective digressions about his life spent as a butler in Darlington hall, the travelogue becomes a vehicle through which he reexamines his past choices and deeply held values. As Kathleen Wall points out, early in the book Stevens spends “six pages of his travelogue on the landscape” and “fifteen on the question of dignity,” which “suggests an unnatural preoccupation with this question” (25). It becomes clear that Stevens is troubled by several serious mistakes in his past: dedicating his life to serving Lord Darlington, failing to reconnect with his father on his death bed, and not acknowledging his love for Miss Kenton. *Remains of the Day* serves as a confessional narrative of these mistakes. As with any confessional narrative, our judgments of Stevens’ confession focus upon the relationship between the ethics of the told and the ethics of the telling, specifically our sense of what he should do to atone, his changing motives as a narrator, and his judgments of himself

Stevens begins his story innocuously enough as a way to share his thoughts with another English butler. He rarely gets the chance to interact with other people besides his employer. In fact, he never leaves Darlington Hall for personal reasons, only for “one professional reason or another” (23). We learn that Stevens hasn’t had the opportunity to speak with a colleague for at least several months. In the prologue he laments, “one does not have the means to discuss and corroborate views with one’s fellow professionals in the way one once did” (17) and reveals that his last opportunity to “get [an] opinion on the question of bantering,” two months prior to the prologue, fell through because the visiting Sir James no longer employed any full time staff (19).

So it appears at first that he has decided to write to a colleague. The language he uses throughout the work supports this understanding: he calls England “our countryside” (11) and “this land of ours” (26), and later refers to “much debate in our profession” over the qualities that make a good butler and how the characteristics of “our generation” play into that (34).

Stevens’ motive—to keep in friendly contact with another butler—makes sense at first, but raises suspicions as we learn more about him. Stevens never names his addressee, nor gives specific details that suggest he is writing to an individual he knows well. Yet he includes intimate details in his story about interpersonal relationships, hopes, fears, and so on. Since he spends almost all his time inside Darlington hall, he has few opportunities to make new acquaintances or meet friends. He mentions a few favorite colleagues by name but in doing so preclude them from being his narratee. It furthermore becomes clear that Stevens is among the last—if not *the* last—of the old-fashioned butlers in England: the batman he encounters observes, “can’t be many of you left, eh?” (119). Yet Stevens seems unaware of or unwilling to acknowledge this. He often expresses surprise or unawareness that an old colleague is no longer employed. This occurs with Sir James’ valet-butler mentioned above, and later with “Mr Graham,” “a good colleague who, incidentally, I seem now to have lost touch with” (170). We are forced to wonder to whom he could possibly be writing, for there are no likely candidates.

One must conclude that Stevens is not writing to anyone else, and thus is only addressing himself. Wall reaches a similar conclusion, but envisions the narratee as “Steven’s younger self, to whom Stevens now justifies the shape of his career” (24). I disagree with this interpretation. It becomes clear that many of Stevens’ conceptions of “dignity” and “professionalism” are formed when he is young, probably when watching his father embody such ideals during his service as a butler. These are not ideals formed in his old age to *justify* his younger self’s actions, but rather

beliefs that guided those decisions in the first place; beliefs which he is now beginning to doubt. So I do not believe he is unconsciously addressing a vision of his younger self. Even at the end of the novel, when he has completely broken down and confessed his mistakes, he seems sincere in insisting upon the illusion: “The hard reality is that for the likes of you and I,” he writes, “there is little choice but to leave our fate [...] in the hands of those great gentlemen [...] who employ our services” (244). Stevens is not willing to acknowledge that he will never send the letter. It is unclear whether he maintains hopes of sending it one day, or whether he perhaps addresses an imaginary narratee as a way to maintain some shred of his dignity.

I focus on the question of narrative audience because it aptly showcases the way that Ishiguro guides our judgments of Stevens’ confessions. Stevens is unreliable, but transparently, sympathetically, and unthreateningly so. As Wall convincingly argues, unreliable narration doesn’t necessarily “imply an ironic distance that is inherently critical” (21). This is an important point to keep in mind when making deductions about the implied author’s guiding judgments. Wall continues by noting, “Stevens is not an entirely unreflective man, merely one who has found it necessary to bracket off large areas of feeling, experience, and desire because of the huge investment he has made in a certain image of himself and of his place in life” (36). Furthermore, if he desired, he could simply turn away and refuse to think about flaws in his understanding of dignity, or lie about Darlington’s actions. Wall echoes Newton and de Man’s conclusions that a sincere movement towards truth is deserving of ethically positive judgments: “As we view Stevens stretching to offer the most searching and honest interpretations of events,” she writes, “that pleasure which Booth believes the audience derives from the irony, from having figured out ‘what really happened,’ is diminished” (23). Wall then outlines some of the important ways that Ishiguro guides us to understand ‘what really happened.’ They involve “psychological

red herrings” where Stevens’ “explanation of motives or reasons is more lengthy than called for,” moments where his “verbal tics [...] indicate his defensiveness,” moments where he cannot successfully “repress his sense of loss” and instead “projects it onto Miss Kenton,” despite having no way of knowing how she feels about a situation (Wall 29). There are many moments where he adopts “a formal register” when his emotions seem to cause him anxiety (Wall 23).

Essentially, Stevens is unreliable, but he is not actively trying to deceive us or even himself. Rather, he is struggling to come to terms with his self-delusion. So while we cannot trust Stevens’ interpretations of events, we come to trust that Ishiguro (through Stevens) will eventually give us the information we need to understand the truth. Stevens does not tell us that he weeps after his father’s death, for example, but does report a conversation in which another person says, “You look as though you’re crying” (105). Wall raises the possibility that Stevens indirectly reports his tears as a way of grieving without violating his sense of dignity (37). I would argue instead that Stevens is more occupied with reliving his past than with rewriting it. Ishiguro has created a character that is not fully in control of his own narrative, as evidenced by his continuing to address an imaginary butler even after disavowing his idea of ‘professional dignity’. It is this reliving, in the context of his journey, that causes him to acknowledge his mistakes and to begin his confession. To further demonstrate how this progression functions, I will discuss Stevens’ transgressions (the ethics of the told) and how he gradually becomes more reliable (the ethics of the telling.)

Stevens makes three main mistakes. The first is his defense of Lord Darlington, who does appear to have acted with good intentions and thus been unduly slandered, but who nonetheless was a tool of Nazi collaboration. Stevens should not be condemned for his service of Lord Darlington, because as a butler he hardly had the political power or influence to prevent his

employer from falling under the influence of the fascists. He could, however, have spoken up against Darlington's dismissal of the two Jewish maids or admit that his employer was a seriously flawed man. His stubborn refusal to acknowledge Darlington's flaws in the beginning of the novel indicates, above all, a serious lapse in judgment and unwillingness to face the truth.

Stevens' failure to reconcile with his father on his deathbed elicits more negative judgments. He is given a clear opportunity to repair their relationship when his father heart-wrenchingly tells him: "I'm proud of you. A good son. I hope I've been a good father to you. I suppose I haven't" (97). Stevens avoids the unspoken question and flees back to his duties. His father dies shortly thereafter, never having been reassured that he was a good father. The reader's judgments here are mitigated somewhat because both men bear responsibility for the poor state of their relationship, and because Stevens is clearly affected by the death; this is the previously discussed moment where he begins weeping in the smoking room. Nonetheless the reader's judgments take a sharp negative turn when Stevens backs away from the truth—that he grieves his father's passing—to hide behind his mask of professionalism, claiming that "For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I do so with a large sense of triumph" (110). To move back towards the truth, Stevens needs to admit that his commitment to "dignity" ruined their relationship and last chance to connect.

Stevens' most troubling mistake is hiding his love for Miss Kenton, and in doing so costing both of them a chance at happiness. As a result of his inaction, Stevens is alone and Miss Kenton ends up in an unhappy marriage. This is the one mistake Stevens is given the opportunity to atone for during the novel. The other individuals affected by his mistakes died or disappeared before he realized the gravity of his errors. Because the book builds up to his meeting with Mrs.

Benn and progressive realization of his mistakes, we anticipate that he will find some way to confess to her.

Next, I will discuss how the progression of *Remains of the Day* builds our sense of these wrongdoings, and fulfills (or fails to fulfill) our expectations for their resolution. Ishiguro gives us several signals from an early moment that should raise suspicions about Stevens' reliability as concerns Darlington. For example, Stevens is quick to defend his former employer, but studiously avoids mentioning what charges exactly he is defending him from:

Whatever may be said about his lordship these days – and the great majority of it is, as I say, utter nonsense – I can declare that he was truly a good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am today proud to have given my best years of service to. (61)

It eventually becomes clear that Darlington was a key agent of Nazi appeasement, and even dismissed two maids for being Jewish. That Stevens is reluctant to reveal or discuss these facts reveals his discomfort with the actions of his employer.

Stevens only slowly begins to consciously realize that he is, in fact, less than proud to have served Darlington. When the country butler/valet helps him with his car and asks if he knew Lord Darlington, Stevens instinctively pretends he did not. Later, he writes that this “unsettled [him] somewhat” (117). Free association leads him to recall another instance when he denied having ever served Lord Darlington. While he did not think much of either incident individually, he struggles to find a justification for the pattern. He hollowly assures himself that he simply wanted to “avoid unpleasantness” and that “nothing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman” though, of course, no one but himself was suggesting such a thing (126). He progresses from claiming: “I am today proud to have given my best years of service to [Lord Darlington]” (61) to the more muted conclusion: “to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of this

world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt" (126). Stevens has not yet confessed his hidden feelings, but he has moved closer to the truth in admitting that Darlington was perhaps not a great man but at least an important one.

It is only at the end of the book, after Stevens has had his heart broken by Mrs. Benn and is at his lowest point, that he is able to confess. He admits to the retired butler:

Lord Darlington wasn't a bad man. [...] At least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. [...] I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship's wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can't even say I made my own mistakes. Really – one has to ask oneself – what dignity is there in that? (243)

While we never judged Stevens particularly negatively in the first place for serving Darlington – as he says, the mistakes were Darlington's and not his own, and there is no way to undo his actions now – this confession is an important positive step for our ethical judgments of him. He has moved towards reliability in recognizing the flaws in his conception of dignity. This moment is truly moving and powerful because we have seen firsthand how fervently Stevens believed in his dignity. Moreover, he judges himself more negatively than the reader does. Ishiguro guides us, through a series of political arguments made by tertiary characters, to understand that Stevens is the victim of English social hierarchy and always held himself to much-too-high standards.

It is particularly important that Stevens not only confesses to himself and his imaginary narratee but also to a flesh-and-blood stranger, not only because it is a greater movement towards truth, but also because it leaves no doubt that he has truly disavowed his ideal of stoic dignity. Since it was his reluctance to show emotion that caused him to flee from his father's attempts to reconcile, it is meaningful that he tearfully confesses to an older, retired butler who could easily be a stand in for his father. While he cannot reconnect with his father, we understand at the novel's end that he would probably do so, had he the chance.

There is one problem with Stevens' confession: it is not given to the person who deserves to hear it, Mrs. Benn. When they finally meet, he continues to refuse to acknowledge how deeply he cares for her. He takes another step away from the truth when asking about her marriage, telling himself that "I would not have dreamt of prying into these areas were it not that I did have, you might recall, important professional reasons for doing so" (234). This is absurd not only because we know better, but because Stevens himself knows better: he is writing this from a point in the future, after Mrs. Benn breaks his heart by admitting that she dreamt of a better life with him. That he should *still* pretend their relationship is strictly professional seems baffling, disappointingly typical and slightly pathetic. Thankfully, Ishiguro gives Mrs. Benn the opportunity to speak out about the sadness that Stevens has caused her:

For a long time, I was very unhappy, very unhappy indeed. But then [...] one day I realized I loved my husband. [...] That doesn't mean to say, of course, there aren't occasions now and then – extremely desolate occasions – when you think to yourself: "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life." And you get to thinking about a different life, a *better* life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I may have had with you, Mr. Stevens. [...] But each time I do so, I realize before long – my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful. (239)

This monologue finally shocks Stevens into a semblance of honesty about his feelings towards her, as he admits that his "heart was breaking" (239). Nonetheless, he does not make any such confession to her. While Mrs. Benn has demonstrated that she neither needs nor expects his confession, because she has moved on and made peace with her life, he still owes her honesty. It is easy to draw parallels between this scene and an earlier moment of honesty between the pair, when Miss Kenton asked:

Do you realize, Mr Stevens, how much it would have meant to me if you had thought to share your feelings last year? [...] Don't you realize how

much it would have helped me? Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to *pretend*? (153-54)

The parallels between these two scenes of quiet conversation are too striking to ignore. Stevens could make amends for his past silence and his inaction by ceasing to pretend. Yet he maintains his façade:

As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock. Indeed, I would not be able to rest if I thought such ideas were the cause of unhappiness for you and your husband. We must each of us, as you point out, be grateful for what we *do* have. And from what you tell me, Mrs Benn, you have reason to be contented. [...] You really mustn't let any more foolish ideas come between yourself and the happiness you deserve. (239-240)

We can perceive that he is trying to encourage her to be happy with her situation, but what he fails to understand is that this reassurance is unwanted: Mrs. Benn does not need his approval to be content with her life. Rather, she was offering him the opportunity to be honest with her. He owes her an apology for the way he treated her, and a confession that he also cared about her deeply but was too obsessed with his idea of professionalism to do anything about it. He does just the opposite in calling her alternative life with him a “foolish idea.” Opportunity lost, the two retreat into professional formality, and she leaves.

While Mrs. Benn has been wronged by Stevens, we have the impression that she has accepted this fact and moved on with her life. Stevens, on the other hand, is devastated by their meeting. We can tell because whereas previously he had written long entries in his journal twice a day about trivial subjects, it takes him two days to write about his meeting with Mrs. Benn. He makes no mention of what happens during this interval – just that he wandered onto the dock, had his tearful confession with the retired butler, and then began his entry. Ultimately we feel great sympathy for Stevens at this point, because his judgments of himself are extremely negative, more so than our own of him. This confession is extremely traumatic for Stevens in

that it causes him to sink into the depths of despair. But it is also therapeutic, and allows him to come to terms with repressed anxieties and regrets.

The ethics of the telling thus lead us to a sympathetic judgment, because Stevens has ceased to delude himself, and has understood the harm his commitment to dignity caused. But the ethics of the told are more complex: he wastes his one opportunity to make amends for what he did to Miss Kenton. Nonetheless, Stevens himself is more negatively affected by his mistakes than anyone else, so in an important sense he has faced the consequences of his decisions. We may thus judge his confession as largely successful. He has made significant progress towards reliability and self-understanding; and he has disavowed many of the beliefs that led to his mistakes in the first place. One can imagine that an outside observer of Stevens' life, upon reading this account, would judge him less negatively for his mistakes. This cautiously positive judgment appears to be what *Remains of the Day* expects of the ideal reader, because it is with a sense of great closure and peace that Stevens makes his decision to "try to make the best of what remains of [his] day" (244). Ultimately *Remains of the Day* seems more concerned with depicting the way in which we "avoid facts that might undermine the coherence of the purpose of narratives we construct about our lives," and using confession as a vehicle to understand how the narratives we create about our lives can harm us, rather than attempting to condemn Stevens for the mistakes that he makes (Wall 21).

Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*

Like Stevens, Humbert Humbert, the character-narrator of *Lolita*, also comes to reexamine his life and arrive at a place of confession and repentance after writing an account of his past. Unlike Stevens, Humbert writes his story from first a “psychopathic ward,” and then a jail cell while attempting to defend a much more serious crime: the murder of Clare Quilty (308). Readers can tell immediately that he is a very unreliable narrator, as he begins by explaining his love for young teenage girls, which he calls “nymphets.” He believes that describing his affair with one girl, Dolores Haze, will absolve him of the murder. As the story progresses, he realizes the extent to which he ruined Dolores’ life. In doing so his motive evolves from a desire simply to defend himself, to an attempt to memorialize his love for Dolores Haze. Throughout the work he makes several confessions to his reader, whom he addresses as the jury, and to himself. As in *Remains of the Day*, our judgments of these confessions depend upon both the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told. The latter comprises the gravity of his mistakes and the actions he takes to compensate for them, the former his changing motives as a narrator and his judgments of himself. Both of these will guide us to judge his confession as successful or not.

Humbert’s crimes are obvious and repugnant by any modern moral standards. The worst is his treatment of Dolores, a 12-year-old girl: he kidnaps, manipulates, drugs, rapes, and terrorizes her. He does this despite being neither insane nor unintelligent. There is no way for him to atone for these crimes, because he cannot return her lost childhood and innocence. These are not his only crimes, though they are central to the novel. His actions throughout the book showcase an extreme lack of concern for others. He harms and uses countless women. He murders Clare Quilty in cold blood. Our demand for confession of these crimes is less immediate because they are secondary to Nabokov’s central focus, and because Humbert is already in jail:

we know he will face some measure of punishment. Nonetheless, an acknowledgement of these crimes would be both a movement towards truth, and evidence that he grasps how his actions affect people besides himself and the object of his desire. We understand that he owes Dolores an apology, to say the least, and he needs to stop defending his immoral actions by depicting young girls as otherworldly nymphets.

We also begin the story with negative judgments of the ethics of Humbert's telling. It is important to remember that Humbert is not attempting to defend his actions against Dolores Haze; he is not even on trial for them. He is on trial for murder, and trying to use his love for Dolores as a kind of defense. As he writes:

When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*, [...] I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. In mid-composition, however, I realized that I could not parade living Lolita. I still may use parts of this memoir in hermetic sessions, but publication is to be deferred. (308)

That he considers this a potentially effective defense shows just how unreliable of an interpreter he is, and the degree to which we should be suspicious of his motives. He is, however, a reliable reporter: he distorts the truth by arguing for his interpretations of events, not by concealing information from us. As he admits, Humbert has important realizations mid-composition. While writing his defense he slowly comes to recognize the true extent of his crimes – no matter how well he justified his actions at the time, he is too intelligent to delude himself when he examines the whole picture. As he comes to admit the truth, his motive changes and he ceases to try to defend himself in order to memorialize Lolita.

It is understandable that many readers remain skeptical of this eventual confession. Humbert has already proven himself to have untrustworthy motives: he begins the novel by attempting to use his pederasty as a defense for his murder of Quilty. When he professes guilt,

how do we know he is sincere? After all, this defense does succeed, in a sense: it is conceivable that he is simply conning his readers in order to gain our sympathy. Humbert certainly possesses the intelligence and skill to fool us. Fortunately, Nabokov provides important clues to help us navigate Humbert's changing motives. They are the same kinds of clues that Ishiguro supplies: breaks in the narrative where the narrator's motives seem to suddenly go askew in an illogical, emotional way. We see Humbert's first breakdown soon after he narrates that he absconds with Dolores:

This daily headache in the opaque air of this tombal jail is disturbing, but I must persevere. Have written more than a hundred pages and not got anywhere yet. My calendar is getting confused. That must have been around August 15, 1947. Don't think I can go on. Heart, head—everything. Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita, Lolita [...] Repeat till the page is full, printer. (109)

While we do not see major character growth or realization arise from this episode, it sets up later breakdowns and shows that Nabokov is purposefully establishing Humbert's fragile mental state. In the following chapters, Humbert grows increasingly disturbed. His most important early break comes when he describes sleeping with Dolores for the first time. He begins by laughably insisting: "these are irrelevant matters, I am not concerned with so-called 'sex' at all," and attempting to build an aesthetic defense for his actions: "A great endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets." (134). But Humbert cannot fully commit to this purpose, as much as he tries. He begins by describing the artful scene he would paint to explain his emotions, with imagery like a "fire opal dissolving within a ripple-ringed pool." But he concludes with an image that is entirely sexual, rooted in the pain that Dolores felt when the pair had sex, and which depicts her as a child rather than a nymphet: "a last throb, a last dab of color, stinging red, smarting pink, a sigh, a wincing child" (135). It's useful to watch how his narrative changes within the space of a few paragraphs – he begins by denying that he has any interest in sex, and by

describing his love for nymphets in poetic imagery. As he continues, however, there is a break: he suddenly uses a decidedly sexual image that depicts Dolores as a child in pain. This doesn't fit with the narrative he has been building. Humbert has continuously and carefully tried to *convince us* to agree with him throughout the story, yet here the imagery is plainly repellent. There's nothing even a little convincing about it. Even he seems to realize this. This is one of the first steps he makes towards the truth. One might ask if Humbert does not intend us to have this reaction; but it is not a big enough step towards the truth to mitigate the consequences of his awful actions and cause us to judge him positively. If he were in complete control of his narrative, that final sentence would not have been written.

Humbert himself even finds his aesthetic nymphet defense unconvincing in the face of this wincing child, although he cannot completely articulate why:

I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world—nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why? . . . I am but nature's faithful hound. Why then this horror that I cannot shake off? (135)

As Humbert describes the following day, there is an odd disconnect between the remembered emotions of the Experiencing-I and the emotions the Narrating-I projects upon the Experiencing-I. At the time, Humbert was largely unhappy because he was afraid Dolores' mood "might prevent [him] from making love to her again" right away (140). But the Narrating-I also attributes the following emotions to his past self:

More and more uncomfortable did Humbert feel. It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed. . . . This was an orphan. This was a lone child, an absolute waif, with whom a heavy-limbed, foul-smelling adult had had strenuous intercourse three times that very morning. Whether or not the realization of a lifelong dream had surpassed all

expectation, it had, in a sense, overshot its mark—and plunged into a nightmare. (140)

It does seem as if the Experiencing-I is, on some level, disturbed by his actions and uneasy at the atmosphere. But it is difficult to imagine this condemnation coming from a man whose chief concerns were finding another opportunity for sex, and telling a light joke to lighten the mood. The depth of these disturbing emotions seems more like the Narrating-I's retrospective influence. At the very least, the inclusion of these interpretations does not fit in with Humbert's narrative. Similarly, the chapter ends with an unexpected sober tone as Humbert describes Dolores's reaction to her mother's death: "but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (142). While his use of the word "gently" still suggests that the Narrating-I has a skewed view of his past actions, the last sentence conveys a certain unexpected insight and empathy for Dolores' plight that shows how monstrous his actions were. Humbert could simply claim that Dolores wanted to seek comfort from him, but more truthfully shows how she had no choice in the matter.

In the novel's second part, Humbert finds it increasingly difficult to hold his defense together. The cracks and breaks in his narrative show more readily. He makes protests ironically: "I am not a criminal sexual psychopath taking indecent liberties with a child. The rapist was Charlie Holmes, I am the therapist—a matter of nice spacing in the way of distinction" (150) and notes that he "succeeded in terrorizing Lo" (151). Slowly he ceases to mount a strong defense, and instead writes about stark reality. He does not cease to describe Dolores as a nymphet, but instead cycles between his fantasy of her and his dawning understanding of the reality he put her through:

And I catch myself thinking today that our long journey had only defiled with a sinuous trail of slime the lovely, trustful, dreamy, enormous country that by then, in retrospect, was no more to us than a collection of dog-eared

maps, ruined tour books, old tires, and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep. (175-76)

While at the time he refused to acknowledge, or act to end, her misery, he has come to recognize the cowardice of his actions. He continues to have breakdown moments to the point of frustration and relative incoherence: “But never mind, never mind, I am only a brute, never mind, let us go on with my miserable story” (193).

One problem is that Humbert never acknowledges his crime in killing Clare Quilty. He writes, “I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges” (308) and later instructs the reader to “not pity C.Q. One had to choose between him and H.H., and one wanted H.H. to exist at least a couple of months longer, so as to have him make you live in the minds of later generations” (309). While we do not necessarily pity Quilty, we must recognize that Humbert is letting himself off the hook both by dismissing his charges and reframing the murder into some kind of inevitable choice “one” had to make. In these ways, Humbert does not make the requisite moves towards truth. But it is also necessary to note the way in which Quilty is Humbert’s doppelganger. In some important way, killing Quilty represents an act of self-loathing. Literally, of course, a man is still dead.

Our most important sense of what Humbert must do is make some kind of amends to Dolores. He has the opportunity to do so when he visits her, years after she runs away. In the beginning of the scene, he seems to have power over her once more: he has a gun, and she is desperate for his money. However, the power balance soon shifts when we and Dolores perceive Humbert’s sad self-delusion. He asks her, “Come just as you are. And we shall live happily ever after” (278). It is a frustrating request because it shows how little the experiencing-I understands the gravity of his actions, but also a pitiful one. Humbert has discovered a “poor truth”: that he still loves Dolores, even “pale and polluted, and big with another’s child” (278). This does not

absolve him of his actions towards the younger Dolores, and it is debatable whether he really loves her, but it does represent a movement away from the aesthetics of the nymphet. Moreover, it seems that his despair and bafflement are genuine. He asks Dolores to come with him, and suddenly the power balance of the scene shifts:

“I’ll die if you touch me,” I said. “You are sure you are not coming with me? Is there no hope of your coming? Tell me only this.”

“No,” she said. “No, honey, no.”

She had never called me honey before.

“No,” she said, ‘it is quite out of the question. I would sooner go back to Cue. I mean—’

She groped for words. I supplied them mentally (“*He* broke my heart. *You* merely broke my life.”) (279)

While Humbert has not apologized to her, per se, this scene shows that such a direct apology is no longer necessary. In saying that he will give her the money no matter what she chooses, Humbert gives Dolores the opportunity to do what she could not before: say no. He gives her closure. Dolores no longer needs an apology (or indeed anything from Humbert) to survive, for she has moved on. We can see this when she calls Humbert “honey,” showing pity and even some compassion. This intimate exchange between the two is key to our judgments of Humbert. The reader sees him suddenly as Dolores does: pitiable. She is also given the opportunity to express her true feelings towards Humbert – that he ruined her life – which he understands implicitly. It is powerful that Humbert, not Dolores, voices this statement. It shows an important recognition of the truth. But it is also important to note that, given the opportunity, Dolores does not voice these thoughts. Rather, she falls silent and is unable to finish her sentence. She may have moved on, but she still bears the scars of her time with Humbert.

Humbert’s attempt at a defense has backfired on him, because he has come to realize that he does not deserve forgiveness. Brooding, he remembers “still other smothered memories, now unfolding themselves into limbless monsters of pain” (284). He perceives his cruelty towards

Dolores, and admits, “the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” of playing children (307). He puts himself in her position, and writes that “there were times when I knew how you felt, and it was hell to know it, my little one, Lolita girl, brave Dolly Schiller” (284-85). In this deep eventual understanding of his crimes, and of Dolores’ experiences, he makes an important positive ethical step. We can believe that it is sincere, because he instructs that “the memoir [be] published only when Lolita is no longer alive” (209). This is an important command for several reasons. The first is that Humbert intended his memoir to be used for his defense, and has given that up. The second is that he is a vain writer, self-impressed with his own artistic ability. The Humbert at the book’s beginning would obtain some pleasure from publishing this work, even (or perhaps especially) if the reactions were negative. Rather he will never experience the fame associated with its publishing. Finally, he takes some action to avoid harming Dolores (209).

Ultimately, our judgments of Humbert are complex. It is unsurprising when readers differ vehemently in their ultimate feelings about the character-narrator. My analysis helps express why one can judge Humbert in a somewhat positive way. Even if the reader ultimately does not buy what Humbert is selling, so to speak, it helps to imagine how we would judge Humbert if we were only allowed to witness his actions, or to read only the portion of the book in which he defends himself. We would surely judge him more harshly. It is not his explanation about his love for nymphets that is convincing. Indeed, that defense only reveals the depth of his inner depravity and delusion. Nor is he redeemed by his writing talent – his intelligence and skill just make us wonder why he puts his ability to use for such awful ends. Instead, any sympathy we feel towards him is a result of his movement towards reliability and truth in acknowledging the consequences of his actions. We may ultimately condemn Humbert. But any positive judgments

we feel for him stem from the *way* he tells us his story, because we are able to witness his progression towards an authentic confession, and because that confession involves a major shift towards the truth and reliability. In those terms, his confession is successful.

This raises the question of the ethics of our engagement with Nabokov, because of course Humbert is a fictional character crafted by the writer. Nabokov has famously been the target of criticism for this book: one might wonder if it is somehow wrong to give Humbert his immense talent with words, or what could be his purpose in generating sympathy for such a monster. We also must ask if it is problematic that Humbert's defense actually *does* work. I think that many of these questions are ones that Nabokov was trying to examine in writing this work. *Lolita* does not depict the ability of beautiful language to overcome ugly action, as some argue. Ultimately, paying attention to Humbert's movement towards truth allows us to see that it is writing the confessional narrative itself that provokes him to feel guilt and shame, and that is a large part of why the book works. Our opinion of him only improves as his opinion of himself worsens, and vice versa. Understanding this can help us navigate some of the complex reactions we have towards novels that make us feel sympathy for someone who ruined other peoples' lives. Confessional narratives can be therapeutic, but are also inherently traumatic for their narrator – they only absolve people of some degree of guilt by first forcing them to confront that which is shameful or troubling. This is why we can accept these instances of ethical language erasing some of the consequences of unethical action.

Ian McEwan's *Atonement*

Ishiguro and Nabokov present us with stories featuring character-narrators who misrepresent themselves, but both authors also take care to orient the reader. Since we understand their works as confessional in nature from fairly early points in the narrative, we begin the novels in a position of superiority to the character-narrators. We expect them to mislead us, and we understand that our role is to not let ourselves be tricked. We are in the author's confidence, as seems natural. In *Atonement*, too, we believe that we are in the author's confidence because the narrator appears to be traditionally modernist with shifting focalization. We assume the narrator is extradiegetic. We assume further that this voice speaks with McEwan's authority and from his perspective: just as we assume that the narrator of *Mrs Dalloway* speaks from Virginia Woolf's perspective.

McEwan shatters this assumption at the end of *Atonement*, revealing that the novel's "author" is an unreliable character-narrator. The narrator speaks with the voice of Briony Talis, as she writes a novel about the circumstances leading to her falsely accusing her sister Cecilia's boyfriend Robbie of rape, and the consequences of that accusation. Briony then shockingly admits that she further deceived the reader: Robbie and Cecilia were never reunited, as she wrote earlier in the book, but rather died during the war. These late revelations cause complex shifts in our judgments of the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told. Examining these shifts can help us understand how readers approach a traditional narrative versus a confessional one: our judgments are first formed under the impression that *Atonement* is the former, then reevaluated once we learn that it is the latter. I will thus discuss our judgments both before and after this watershed moment. Afterwards, I will address what McEwan risks and potentially gains in betraying his readers' trust with this twist ending.

Before we realize that Briony is telling her own story, we focus on the ethics of the told rather than those of the telling. We have little reason to examine the ethics of the telling, because we assume the teller's motives are simply to recount a story for us. The ethics of the told, on the other hand, are fascinatingly complex. Briony's accusation of rape has grave consequences: it destroys Robbie's reputation and career, separates him from Cecilia and his mother, sends him to prison and then to the war. It allows Lola's true rapist to go free. Our negative judgments are mitigated, though, because Briony is a naive child who misunderstands a complex situation. She tells "the truth she felt and spoke" (163), imagining that she is helping her cousin: "If her poor cousin was not able to command the truth, then she would do it for her. *I can. And I will*" (158). She does not act out of malice, or with a conscious awareness that she is wrong, but out of a desire to protect her loved ones. She may be "weak, stupid, confused, cowardly, evasive," as she reflects later, "but she had never thought of herself as a liar. . . . She hadn't intended to mislead, she hadn't acted out of malice" (318). Furthermore, she was not solely responsible for Robbie's sentencing. The entire court system, and the adult world, took the process out of her hands. "There were no opportunities, no time, no permission" to temper her claims; "Within a couple of days, no, within a matter of hours, a process was moving fast and well beyond her control" (159). Late in the novel, McEwan reinforces the point that Briony does not bear sole responsibility for the blunders of the justice system. The others, including Robbie and Cecilia, were just as quick to blame an innocent man, Danny Hardman, for the rape. It becomes clear that Briony was ignorant of entire aspects of the judiciary process. It seems likely she unduly blames herself for a situation that was more complex than she could understand—issues of class certainly must have played a role. Finally, and most importantly, most negative judgments

cannot withstand the revelation that Robbie and Cecilia found happiness together after the war. Destiny or chance serendipitously erased the awful consequences of Briony's actions, we think.

We form our judgments of what Briony must do to make amends at the end of Part One. She must set the record straight in regards to Robbie, understand the harm she caused (chiefly in building up false narratives), and apologize for her actions. Part Three, which focuses on Briony's life as a young nurse, sees her meet these expectations. It becomes clear that she deeply regrets her actions and has taken steps towards repentance by dedicating herself to an ascetic life helping others. She reflects that "she could have been at her sister's college," "in a "parallel life . . . at Girton, reading Milton," "rather than her sister's hospital" (258-59). Though she does not say as much, Briony sacrificing her passion for literature in order to become a nurse for the war effort is clearly out of solidarity with Robbie, a soldier who was forced to give up his potential medical career. Through interacting with the wounded soldiers, especially the dying young Luc, she comes to gain humility and understand a small part of the horrors that Robbie has experienced. Her time as a nurse serves as a sort of penance.

We also see that the more mature Briony is burdened every day by her guilt, and that she acknowledges the consequences of her actions, including the tertiary ones. When she finds out that Lola has married her rapist and thus he will never be prosecuted, Briony recognizes that she "was more than implicated in this union. She had made it possible" (268). She furthermore takes whatever steps she can to fix things. Though Cecilia is rightfully hostile towards her, Briony visits her and Robbie. She offers both the truth and a sincere apology, knowing that it is "foolish and inadequate" (329), and telling them: "I don't expect you to forgive me" (318). She decides to write an account—the novel—in order to set the record straight. If the novel ended here, we would judge her positively, not only because her primary victims were able to recover from the

consequences of her actions, and because she acknowledged her guilt and sincerely tried to make amends, but because she has moved away from the simplistic aesthetics of *The Trials of Arabella*. A key reason that led her to mistrust Robbie was her childish obsession with crafting fairy-tale narratives: her sister was the tragic heroine she could protect from the villainous Robbie. She created a world of black and white, with good guys and bad guys. At the end of Part Three, she recognizes that her atonement will require a more nuanced kind of story telling. Despite this realization, the story ends neatly in a relatively happy resolution with the lovers reunited and Briony determined to do right.

At this point, it is revealed that we have been reading Briony's work the entire time. Our judgment shift is relatively small for several reasons: it is not terribly surprising by this point. McEwan left hints to this throughout the book, like Briony's rejected manuscript and her lifelong desire to be a writer. Furthermore, we have the happy resolution in our mind, and her pure motives to redeem Robbie, and so no real reason to become angry with Briony once more. It is problematic that Briony herself wrote the interpretations of events that caused us to mitigate our negative judgments of her. But on the other hand, she does not shy away from critiquing her actions and negatively portraying herself. She portrays the minds of other people, like Robbie and Cecilia, with sensitivity and sympathy. Briony does not seem unreliable. She appears to have written a story that is everything a confessional work should be: truthful and clear-eyed. Our judgments might waver, but remain generally positive because the satisfactory ending outweighs any negative judgments. We have not exactly been tricked, only surprised.

The reader's judgments only shift radically once we read the novel's epilogue, which exists in the realm of McEwan's work as Briony's journal entry, separate from *Atonement* as

authored by Briony. It reveals that Briony was an unreliable narrator, and that Robbie and Cecilia found no such happy ending. She writes:

It is only in this last version that my lovers end well. All the preceding drafts were pitiless. But now I can no longer think what purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station. That I never saw them in that year. That my walk across London ended at the church on Clapham Common, and that a cowardly Briony limped back to the hospital, unable to confront her recently bereaved sister. That the letters the lovers wrote are in the archives of the War Museum. (350)

This shocking revelation forces the reader to entirely reevaluate the novel. We have thought that McEwan was on our side, privileging us with the truth. In actuality, he and Briony have fooled us. While there are a few hints scattered throughout the book, no reader could honestly claim that they saw this coming. One might worry about Robbie's health at the end of Part 2, but there is no hint that the confrontation in Part 3 was entirely fabricated. This is not a delightful trick intended to please, but indeed a traumatic one that causes us to reevaluate our judgments of both the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told.

The ethics of the told become more negative, yet complex, since we recognize that these negative judgments are unfair. While Briony did not kill the lovers, her actions set in motion a chain of events that led to their deaths. She attributes the following thoughts to herself as a young woman, though it's impossible to know if she truly felt this way at the time, or if this is her older self's opinion imposed retrospectively on her younger self:

If something happened to Robbie, if Cecilia and Robbie were never to be together . . . Her secret torment and the upheaval of war had always seemed separate worlds, but now she understood how the war might compound her crime. The only conceivable solution would be for the past never to have happened. (271-72)

It is not fair, but it is the truth. Briony could not have foreseen this tragic outcome, but it happened nonetheless due to her accusation. She cannot be blamed for their deaths, but we can no longer temper our negative judgments by considering that the situation eventually worked itself out. Moreover, we learn that Briony never apologized to Cecilia and Robbie, even though she had the opportunity to do so. Most importantly, we learn that she never cleared Robbie's name. She was too afraid of libel and lawsuits ruining her career to do what was right by the man she wronged.

The ethics of Briony's telling are problematic on many levels. We had judged her positively for evolving as an author, and moving away from works like *The Trials of Arabella*. Yet ultimately these are the happy aesthetics to which she reverts with this novel: she rewrites her earlier, more sophisticated drafts, and creates a happy fairytale ending where the lovers are reunited at last. She vowed to create an honest, great work. Instead she sold herself short and wrote something comforting, and below her ability. Yet our judgments are complex, because we are complicit in this ending. We found as much pleasure in its improbability as she did. We allowed ourselves to be seduced, so it is somewhat difficult to stand in judgment of Briony when we would have preferred not to know "the truth." But ultimately, no matter how aesthetically pleasing this choice, we cannot approve it. Her attempts to whitewash history instinctively feel wrong, and she makes some profoundly problematic justifications for her retelling:

No one will care what events and which individuals were misrepresented to make a novel. I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. As long as there is a single copy [...] then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love. (350)

Here we can see her conflating real-life with fairytale narrative, casting Robbie as a literal prince. This version of events is nice, but delusional. What really happened was that Robbie and Cecilia died apart from each other, in part because of her accusation. Briony was once haunted by this fact, but in her old age searches for a way to redeem herself. She pretends as if her writing this story accomplished something, that it was “a final act of kindness, a stand against the oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness” (351). We may have found the fake ending more pleasing, but no reader would seriously believe it did anything to unite Robbie and Cecilia in the story world.

While Briony prides herself on being “not so self-serving as to let them forgive me,” she adds a qualification that lets us know even this last semblance of penitence will fade: “not quite, not yet” (351). She intends to forgive herself. It is furthermore hard to sympathize with Briony because her motivations are murky and suspect. In *Remains of the Day* and *Lolita*, the character-narrators write their works over an intense and fairly brief period of time. They start with one purpose, but gradually change to another. They do not create drafts, and there is no time for revision. As a result, we can directly see their changing motives in telling. Briony, on the other hand, revises her work over fifty-nine years and produces more than “half a dozen different drafts” (349). She broods over it. We do not get to witness any dawning recognition of guilt, it is present in the narrator from the first pages and it simply appears, fully realized, in the young woman Briony in the novel’s third part. In these confessional narratives, witnessing an unreliable narrator’s gradual movement towards truth elicits more positive judgments in us because it feels authentic and sympathetic. Worse yet, Briony simply moves from fully accepting the truth of her guilt (in her *Atonement*’s last pages) to fully denying it (in her journal entry.) The lack of a traceable progression of motive makes these sudden changes baffling and shocking. Since

Briony has completely moved away from the truth in her old age, and we simply cannot view this change in an ethically positive way.

We also, for the first time, judge the ethics of McEwan's telling. This final diary entry is like his confession to us. But it seems like the somewhat self-satisfied confession of an author who managed to pull one over on his readers. Many readers react to this twist by feeling betrayed or tricked. In any novel, we form a relationship with the narrator. We begin to understand how Humbert or Stevens think, and grow familiar with their traits. In works such as *Remains of the Day* and *Lolita*, where we realize from an early moment that the narrator is unreliable, we come to place our trust in the implied author to signal us towards the truth. We know we cannot trust the narrator, but we can trust that the implied author will provide enough clues for us to deduce the true story. Throughout the majority of *Atonement*, the narrator appears to be that trustworthy, modernist voice we have encountered many times before. The narrator and the author are conflated. The ethics of the telling are thus straightforward: we are told about a fictional girl who makes a serious mistake, and there is ostensibly a fairly straightforward moral component to the story. When this barrier between storyteller and character begins to dissolve, the ethics of the telling become murkier. McEwan risks our negative judgments, but in doing so accomplishes several things. He is able to point out that, just like Briony, we are guilty of longing for happy, neat stories. Chiefly, it allows him to break down the barriers between us and Briony. Rather than sitting in a position of superiority to her, suspicious of her every explanation, we take her interpretation at their word. We are able to enter her mind and experience her feelings and understanding of others. A reader's initial judgments might be extremely harsh, because of our shock and feelings of betrayal, and because we are left with a vision of Briony at her most

delusional. However, *Atonement* challenges our normal understanding of progressions because it is a work that must be read at least twice for the reader to fully recenter him or herself.

Only on the second reading can we appreciate many complex aspects of the work. For example, Briony's final confrontation to the couple becomes heartbreaking when read with the knowledge that she is simply imagining it. On first reading, it involves Robbie and Cecilia sternly holding Briony responsible for her actions. On subsequent readings, it becomes Briony refusing to forgive herself and acting out the alternate future she denied her sister and Robbie. We can see how devastated she is by their loss, how keenly she understands it, and how she aches to have done the right thing. Had that scene actually happened, or been written by someone else, it would not tell us nearly so much.

Moreover, our despair at Robbie and Cecilia's deaths can mirror Briony's despair as she nears death. Her sudden justification in changing the ending is due to a deep loss of faith in the purpose of truth. She wonders:

How can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. (350)

This seems to get at the heart of McEwan's concern with the power of storytelling. In our world, there *is* something outside of the author: the reader. The act of writing itself is an appeal to a reader to make judgments about the value of the work and the worth of continuing to read. It is the reader's prerogative to make judgments. If Briony's readers are made aware of the full extent of her crimes, and forgive her anyway, has she not been forgiven in some meaningful sense? If she entrusts the readers to give life to Cecilia and Robbie in their imaginations, why not entrust them to forgive?

This is a confession that ultimately does not work, because it refuses to be a confession. Yet at the same time, in initially removing us from a position of judge and writing a novel that should be read twice, McEwan examines the snap judgments we form about confessions. It is perhaps not fair to be sympathetic to Briony when we view the world from her not-so-dissimilar eyes, only to condemn her as soon as we view her tale as a confession. Perhaps sitting as judge allows us to feel better about ourselves, while simultaneously learning less from the story. In Briony's shoes, we understand her actions. We want the same happy endings. Removed from them, sympathy is replaced with something more like moral righteousness.

McEwan elicits incredibly complex judgments in his readers as a result of his choices. Rather than simply asking if Briony atones for her mistakes, McEwan makes us wonder whether she *can* atone, and the role that authors and readers each play in the process of atonement. By concealing the nature of the novel's narrator, he places the reader fully in Briony's consciousness and breaks down barriers of mistrust we might normally erect against a character-narrator. While this novel shows that witnessing a movement towards truth and honesty is of utmost importance to a reader's positive ethical judgments, it also asks if perhaps judging others is not unduly privileged over understanding others.

Conclusion

My comparison of these three novels demonstrates that authors frequently use confessional narratives to examine the ethical issues raised by storytelling itself: how our innate trust in the extradiegetic author compares with our instinctive skepticism of intradiegetic narrators; the role that intent and motive play in influencing our judgments; how judgments are both inherent to narrative and counterproductive to understanding others' experiences; the importance of one's judgment of oneself versus others' judgments of oneself; how ethical language can replace ethical action; and what it means to judge a telling as "successful." My research also demonstrates that there is an important difference between the success of these confessions and the success of their novels. Briony's confession is unsuccessful, but that fact makes *Atonement* a powerful statement about confession itself.

It is important to remember that while these novels demonstrate some of the ways in which confessional narratives may work, they are not standard confessions. Each work is effective in part because it subverts the reader's expectations. *Remains of the Day* is surprising because we might not expect a stuffy English butler to be the source of such an emotional and touching confession. *Lolita* guides readers unexpectedly to feel some pity for a monster – not because of his celebrated intellect or skill with language, but as a result of witnessing his authentic arrival at an understanding of his crime. *Atonement* asks us to question how we relate to authors, character-narrators, and the act of storytelling. It prompts us to consider how inherently unfair the process of judgment often is. Examining how these three novels function as confessions helps illuminate some of the ways in which they in particular lead readers to unexpected judgments of character-narrators. It also demonstrates the complexity the relationship between the ethics of the telling and the ethics of the told, and how many layers

readers unconsciously take into account when forming judgments of a work. When we contrast our judgments of these works, it can be sobering to realize that we have been guided to feel more anger towards an elderly woman who made a mistake as a child, but less with a pederast who ruined a little girl's life, just because of the way they told us their stories.

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